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The effect of psychological intervention in reducing disciplinary cases among malaysian secondary school students

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Abstract

This study evaluates the effect of using counseling skills and cognitive method, as a psychological intervention, among secondary school students who are involved in disciplinary cases. The study examined the rate of disciplinary cases among the students before and after the intervention. Ninety students ($N = 90$) were involved in this study, which used a quasi experimental design. Data were analyzed using a nonparametric test. Results show that the number of disciplinary cases in the treatment group was reduced compared to the control group. However, there was no significant difference between the individual-treatment group and the group-treatment group. In the questionnaires given to the participants regarding the intervention, most students preferred to have the intervention first (in a group session), followed by an individual session. Participants also felt that the intervention helped them to be more aware of their misbehavior as well as the consequences of their actions. Implications are discussed at the end of the paper.

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1. Introduction

It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the occurrence of disciplinary problems in schools. According to the Ministry of Education, Malaysia during the school session in 2010, a total of 111,484 students were involved in indiscipline problems (Loo, 2010). Out of these students, more than 60 percent were from secondary schools, while around 35 percent were from primary schools. The report also explains the number of students involved in seven types of misconduct. The highest number of misconduct was truancy (19,545 or 12%), followed by impolite behavior (0.39% or 18,346), criminal behavior (12.32 % or 18%) and wasting time (0.33 % or 17,808). Misconduct that involved small percentage of students includes obscenity (3,031 or 12.06 %), vandalism (5,212, or 0.1 %), and delinquency (8,563 or 0.16 %).

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Without treatment, students and schools may be adversely affected. Several studies have revealed that students who were involved in disciplinary problems may lack social skills and have poor academic performance; thus, they may end up becoming criminals in the future (Ali & Yusof, 2004; Finn, Fish, & Scott, 2008; Muralirajoo, 2000).

Recent writings have stated that what occurs in one's cognition plays significant role in behavior (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Siegel & Senna, 2000). Maladjusted social information processing has been identified as major contributing factors for the increasing of disruptive behavior. Students who are involved in disciplinary problems may have processed social information and interpret it from the negative perspective (Crick & Dodge, 1994). They will always see others as having hostility intention thus will take aggressive action (Bemak, Chung, & Murphy, 2003; Rice & Dolgin, 2008). Crick and Dodge (1994) claimed that these children act aggressively because they think that others have the intention to harm them. So these children will act first in order to protect themselves.

Children spend about 7 hours a day at school, excluding attending curricular activities. Thus, an ideal place to give intervention to them is at schools. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in finding solutions to curb disciplinary problems among students especially for those in the secondary educational level. Disciplinary teachers usually use the behavioral approach in dealing with such students while guidance and counseling teachers counsel them (Ang, 2005; Zainal, Ahmad Tarmizi, Kasa & Ahmad Ibrahim, 2007).

However, questions have been raised concerning the effect of the intervention given to these students. More recently, literature has emerged that offers contradictory findings about the effectiveness of methods used by disciplinary and counseling teachers. Despite the impact of using penalties to curb disciplinary problems in the short term, this sentence, in the long run, is reported to cause tension in students and, as a result, is considered improper to use with teenagers. Instead of feeling ashamed of conducting the offenses, these students are found to be proud of their wrongdoings as their peers tend to look up to them as they accept their sentences (Puteh, Abdullah, & Shaffai, 2007; Zainal et al., 2007; Yaacob & Salleh, 2005).

When they go to school counselors, it was found that these children have a negative perception of teachers (Mat Amin, 2005). Students were found to think that guidance and counseling teachers have harmful intentions. Studies revealed that these students perceived seeing a school counselor as a punishment. As a result, they meet with counselors involuntarily (Salim, 2001). However, counseling is meant to be used for clients who participate voluntarily. Clients who may be in a state of incongruence and who are searching for ways to resolve their personal problems are considered *voluntarily* clients (Rogers, 1957; Mat Amin, 2005). On the contrary, *involuntarily* clients do not feel they need counseling services as they feel they do not have any problems (Salim, 2001). Thus, clients who are referred to counselors involuntarily often feel that they are being punished without reason. They think whatever they did is right and, therefore, seeing a counselor is not applicable to them as they do not have any problems to be solved (Osborn, 1999; Salim, 2001). As a result, these clients are defensive and reluctant to receive any help from a counselor (Salim, 2001). So far, however, there has been little discussion about the possible intervention excluding counseling by guidance and counseling teachers.

Thus, a psychological intervention module is recommended to decrease the rate of disciplinary cases at schools. A psychological intervention module, taken from the recommendations submitted by Salim, S (2001), specifically targets ways in which counselors can deal with students who are referred by teachers. This study attempts to show the effect of the Psychological Intervention Module on the frequency of disciplinary problems among secondary school students.

2. Methodology

The study used a quasi experimental design with purposive sampling and measures taken from the school report.

2.1. Participant

Three secondary schools with students of similar socio-demographic characteristics in suburban school districts in Selangor, Malaysia, were participants in this study. Selangor was chosen due to the fact that Selangor is one of the states with the highest number of enrolled students in Malaysia. The participants in the study were 90 students

($N = 90$). The students were all 16 years old, with an equal number of boys and girls; that is: 45 boys and 45 girls. The students were all form-four students. More than half (52.2%) of the participants were average academic achievers. About 30% of them were low academic achievers and 14% were high academic achievers. Their achievement level was measured through their performance in prior examinations which were set up by the Ministry of Education and are known as Lower Certificate of Education. The highest percentage of offenses committed by the participants in this study were truancy (44.4%) and not being neatly dressed (27.8%). Other offenses, which came in below 10%, were crimes, being impolite, vandalism, and smoking.

2.2. Measures

The rate of offenses were taken from their school records respectively. Before the intervention was given to the students, most of the participants had committed the disciplinary offense once (47.8%), while others had done it—twice (18.9 %), three times (15.6%), four times (10%), five times (5.6%), and six times (2.2%).

2.3. Procedures

Prior to the start of this study, a month was spent to obtain the names of students from the school authorities. A questionnaire was then given to them to ensure their suitability for participation in this particular study. A facilitator was assigned to the three schools involved to give the intervention to the students. The intervention is comprised of two individual sessions and four group sessions.

Several procedures were used to assess implementation fidelity. The sessions were videotaped, recorded, and transcriptions were created in order to assess the procedures used.

Participants were divided into three groups. The first group was the control group, the second group was the individual intervention group, and, finally, the last group received the group form intervention. For the control group, students would just go through their normal procedures at school. For the treatment group, participants were divided into two groups. The first group was given psychological intervention individually, while the second group was given psychological intervention in a group session. The steps taken for both group were the same; however, more time was given to group session as it involved more students compared to individual sessions. Data for the post test were taken about 3 months after the intervention was carried out.

3. Results

Data were collected from the school authorities before the participants were given the intervention. They were divided into three groups and treatment for each group was assigned randomly.

After the Psychological Intervention was given to the treatment group, disciplinary records of all participants were taken from the school authorities as post-test data. The data for the pretest (before the intervention) was not normally distributed. Thus, the data were analyzed using a nonparametric test.

To compare the data between the control group and the treatment group, a Mann-Whitney U test was used. After correcting for ties and doing a Z-score conversion, results were found to be significant ($Z = -1.988, p < 0.05$). Which means there was a significant difference in the level of disciplinary problems between the control and the treatment group. Referring to Table 1 below, it can be said that the mean difference between the control group and treatment group before and after the intervention is -9.40 and 4.70, respectively. This shows that the control group had a higher frequency of disciplinary problems when compared to the treatment group.

Table 1. Mean Rank Between Control and Treatment Group in Pre-test and Post-Test

| Groups | Pre-Test Mean | Post-Test Mean |
|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Control Group | 42.53 | 51.93 |
| Experimental Group | 46.98 | 42.28 |

However, results of Mann-Whitney *U* test showed there was no significant difference between individual-treatment group and the group-treatment group ($p > .05$). It shows both modalities of treatment were similar in effectiveness, that is, reducing the level of misconduct among students. However, Table 2 shows that the mean between pre-test and post-test is greater for the group intervention compared to individual intervention (0.20 and 9.20 respectively). This shows that a more positive impact may be achieved by giving psychological intervention in groups sessions when compared to individual sessions.

Table 2. Mean Rank Between Individual Treatment and Group Treatment in Pre-test and Post-Test

| Groups | Pre-Test Mean | Post-Test Mean |
|----------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Individual Treatment | 45.18 | 44.98 |
| Group Treatment | 48.78 | 39.58 |

This finding was also found supported by the responses given by the students, to the questionnaires, when they were asked about their views concerning the intervention. A total of 69 participants said they were satisfied with the intervention provided, while the others did not answer the question. A suggestion given, pertaining to the modality of treatment, was that students would prefer to meet school counselors initially in groups, and then later in individual sessions.

This study proved that the psychological intervention given to students did have a positive impact on the level of disciplinary problems reported. The frequency of misbehavior in the treatment group dropped when compared to the control group. In addition, there was a slight difference between the two modalities of interventions given—group sessions vs. individual sessions. Group sessions were found to have a more positive impact on students' disciplinary problems (that is, lowering the level of disciplinary problems) when compared to individual meetings.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results showed that the Psychological Intervention Module can contribute to the decrease in the frequency of disciplinary problems among secondary school students. Therefore, it is believed that this intervention could be used by guidance and counseling teachers when dealing with such students. The intervention helps students to feel less threatened by the services given by the Guidance and Counseling Unit and, thus, the students are more open to guidance from them. This, in turn, helps to reduce the frequency of the participants committing any future offenses. Previous studies also claimed that the intervention that is most suitable for students would increase their well-being and future undertakings (Baker & Gerler, 2004). I believe this intervention achieves this goal.

This study was carried out to look at the effect of a Psychological Intervention Module on disciplinary problems in students. The results showed that individual and group psychological intervention modules can decrease the frequency of disciplinary offenses. Thus, this study shows that a psychological intervention could expand the repertoire for guidance and counseling teachers who are working with students who are mandated to see them.

This paper did not investigate the effect of the module in different school environments or for different offenses (other than those offenses listed earlier in this paper). Thus, further studies should be taken to determine the effectiveness of this module in different school environments as well as for students of different level of age..

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